

# Critical dialogue Homosexuality in Cuba

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In presenting a special section on Cuban cinema shortly after one on gays in film, we of the JUMP Cut staff are aware that we must address the issue of homosexuality in Cuba, for this is the main concern of many leftists, feminists, and gay activists in North America and Europe as they try to evaluate the Cuban revolution. Several of us on the editorial board visited the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) this summer, but the statement on homosexuality here represents neither a full report on sexual politics in Cuba as these staff members observed it, nor an analysis of their experiences at ICAIC. For those who went to Cuba, the trip only served to reinforce emotionally and politically the solidarity they felt with the accomplishments of the Cuban revolution, which has built a society that stands as one of the most impressive achievements of this century, won and maintained in spite of the fiercest opposition by the United States government. In fact, the JUMP CUT visitors to Cuba found that one of the effects of the U.S. blockade has been to hinder intellectual exchange, theoretical and practical political exchange, between Cubans and most of the North American left. ICAIC personnel, particularly the women, said they knew nothing about the North American and Western European feminist movements and less about feminist writing or feminist filmmaking, but they expressed a great interest that this gap be closed with both an ongoing dialogue and an exchange of written materials.

Knowing that concern about homosexuals in Cuba is the major stumbling block for many people here in accepting the Cuban revolution and hoping to open a dialogue on the subject with our hosts without being heavy-handed about it, JUMP CUT staffers took to ICAIC about fifty copies of JUMP CUT 16, which included the Gay Special Section and our editorial on the left's responsibility in the gay struggle. We

hoped that its distribution would make our position clear and that it might precipitate a principled discussion of this issue between the Cubans and us. However, the copies of JUMP CUT were accepted in silence, ignored, and even, at one point, called "badly intentioned." It seemed impossible for North American visitors to raise the issue of homosexuality without producing defensiveness or being thought of as critics "out to get the revolution," even though issues of sexism and homophobia were the only points of political difference with the Cubans that the JUMP CUT staffers chose consistently to struggle around in the course of the trip.

Certainly, variations between cultural contexts make the issue of homosexuality in Cuba a difficult one to discuss. Seated in urban areas in North America, it is all too comfortable for us to criticize the limitations of a society starting from scratch. At the same time, we feel a responsibility to our readership to try to come to terms with the Cuban public policy on homosexuality and its observable effects on cultural life.

Official Cuban policy on homosexuality has changed progressively and is now considerably more advanced than general popular sentiment. Given Cuban history, understandable factors inhibit a more open consideration of homosexuality there. First, Cubans emphasize the family as the basic unit of the revolution, and children as the bearers of the true revolutionary spirit, both considered arguments for heterosexuality. Second, before 1959, Havana was used by foreigners as a kind of Tijuana, leading to the persistence even today of an image of the male prostitute as the prototype of homosexuality. Third, there is a notion operating in most communist countries and many leftists movements which equates homosexuality with "capitalist decadence." Fourth, communist and capitalist countries both still give credence to the reactionary, pseudo-scientific view of homosexuality as a disease to be cured. Finally, the still-problematic Latin ethic of machismo enforces homophobia — for example, the worst insult between men is the epithet *maricón* (fairy). In ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, Sara Gomez's otherwise incisive critique of machismo, the male hero defends his masculinity by saying, "I'm no *maricón*." The naturalness with which these words are said in the film clearly indicates that they denote a popular sentiment shared by the audience.

Cuban public policy, while better than popular views, is nevertheless still repressive to homosexuals in significant ways. Specifically, the policy regarding homosexuality in the sphere of culture and education was set at the First Cuban Congress on Culture and Education, where the tone and formulations of its final Declaration were very much influenced by the "Padilla affair." The distortions of the Padilla case by the anti-Cuban Western press make this an unfortunate point of reference, for "Padilla" now means to the Cubans, "The understanding of our culture is hopelessly and often maliciously distorted abroad," as

much as it refers to the facts of the case itself. Such cross-cultural "noise" and confusion, however, does not cancel out the documentation of the part played by homosexuality in the Padilla case (see Lourdes Casals, *El Caso Padilla – Literatura y revolución en Cuba: Documentos*, New York, Ediciones Nueva Atlantida, 1971. All citations below are drawn from this book.) The open homosexuality of a number of members of Padilla's circle was not the only issue and certainly not the principal reason for his arrest in March, 1971. Padilla was aligned with a group of artists and intellectuals in Havana whose pro-individualism and taste for Western formalism landed them on the wrong side of Cuba's commitment to an egalitarian, revolutionary people's culture. Certainly this official Cuban position on the role of the revolutionary intellectual is one we are in political agreement with.

The Cultural and Educational Congress detailed the legitimate demands communism can make on intellectuals. In fact, we can only admire here Cuba's fight against the remnants of cultural imperialism, its call for all educated people to place their abilities and resources in the service of building a new society, and its reshaping of cultural and educational organs to meet the needs of the masses. These were the main themes of Fidel's speech to that first congress, in which he also made indirect reference to the Padilla affair and its international impact by stating that the problems of Cuban culture must be addressed only in terms defined by revolutionary Cubans, not as these problems are judged by "bourgeois liberals" abroad. Fidel spoke of the pressing need for school construction, books, audiovisual educational technology, chalk, desks, clothes, shoes, and hot meals. The teachers and the students, Fidel said, knew what they needed from education and culture and it was not the kind of culture dictated by an intellectual elite.

Simultaneously, this Congress acted with a revolutionary puritanism that was homophobic. Again referring indirectly to the Padilla affair, the Congress stated:

"The cultural organs cannot serve to proliferate pseudo-intellectuals who try to make snobbism, extravagance, homosexuality, and other social aberrations into expressions of revolutionary art, so far away are they from the masses and the spirit of our revolution."

In more specific terms, in pronouncing on "fashion, customs, and excesses," the Congress concluded, "It is necessary to maintain the monolithic and ideological unity of our community" and "to confront directly, so as to eliminate them, excessive aberrations." And in pronouncing on sexuality, the Congress stated, "Although homosexuality should not be considered a central or fundamental problem of our society," it requires attention as a "social pathology" and its "manifestations" should be rejected in all their forms. Homosexuals in cultural organizations were specifically cited as "a problem." It was

stated that homosexuals should not have any direct relation to the education of the young through artistic and cultural activities and, by implication, should not represent the revolution abroad. The Commission on Sexuality (of this Congress) set out abundant suggestions on how to identify homosexuals, study "their degree of deterioration," and "cure their orientation."

The proposed 1978 penal code details "crimes against the normal development of sexual relations, and against the family, childhood, and youth," but does not specifically prohibit homosexuality between consenting adults. However, according to this proposal, fines or imprisonment may still be imposed for "displaying this (homosexual) conduct in an ostentatious public manner" or "offending decency and proper customs with ... scandalous public acts" or producing "publications, tapes, movies, photographs, or other obscene objects which might tend to pervert and degrade proper customs" (taken from *Juventud rebelde*, a Cuban Communist youth daily, translated in *Gay Community News*, Boston, October 7, 1978). In other words, the new law would make a distinction between public and private homosexuality, and put severe restrictions on dealing with themes of homosexuality in cultural productions.

The difference between North American and Cuban views is made clear by the example of a recent Canadian Film Board film by Claude Jutra and Vivienne Leebosch, ARTS CUBA. In that film, among other things, Cuba's most famous painter, Rene Portacarrero, is filmed at home with his companion, a male friend and poet with whom he has lived for many years. The visual message in the Canadian film is clear. Because he is so well known, famous and beloved beyond reproach, Portacarrero can afford such a mise-en-scene.

Yet in Cuba, one JUMP CUT person talked to a young filmmaker who was filming ICAIC's documentary on Portacarrero. When asked if the film would include mention of the painter's homosexuality, the filmmaker replied, "No, of course not, that has nothing to do with his art." An attempt was made to explain that had Portacarrero a wife and child, they would be portrayed as a matter of course in any portrait of his life. What does it mean then to omit any depiction or discussion of Portacarrero's life style? Would an open depiction implicate both filmmaker and painter in making a film that "tended to pervert and degrade proper customs"? The *de facto* attitude toward homosexuals in Cuba today seems to us to be a demand for silence, an obligatory life in the closet, as borne out by this filmmaker's reaction. To present Portacarrero in film as a homosexual would constitute "blatency" and public exposure, both privileges available only to heterosexuals in Cuba at this point.

That absence of homosexuality as imaginable subject matter in film

appears to be a part of ICAIC policy. Discussing the script process at ICAIC, the U.S. critics learned that anything at all can be the subject of a proposed film as long as it isn't counterrevolutionary. Asked whether a script could ever be approved that dealt with homosexuality, an ICAIC official said, "No, that would be counterrevolutionary."

The JUMP CUT people on this trip and others we know who have recently traveled to Cuba all met people who would talk about their homosexual friends and about leading public figures, especially in the arts, who were generally known to be homosexuals but whose names could not be revealed — or even mentioned here in an U.S. film periodical — for fear of repression, especially in terms of their work. Identification in print, "coming out," would constitute a real jeopardy to their positions. Certainly, while the situation for homosexuals remains as it is in Cuba, JUMP CUT has no desire to violate confidences that would endanger the positions of private citizens, artists, or public officials. But we wish to emphasize that if so many people know names and cannot name them in print, this is also to admit the reality of homosexual repression in Cuba, even for those who live in the relative protection of a more permissive Havana intellectual milieu.

We hope to have more extensive articles in JUMP CUT on sexual politics in Cuba, Cuban cultural production, and exemplary Cuban films which deal with these issues and contradictions. The implementation of the Cuban Family Code, requiring husband and wife to divide all household chores and childcare equally if both work, stands as a testimony to the population's commitment to move forward toward more egalitarian personal relations. We raise these other issues about Cuban policy and practice in the area of sexual politics because we believe, in all solidarity, that the combination of feminism and leftism in North America has produced an analysis of sexual politics which can be of service to other left cultures and movements in the whole world. In asking the Cubans to reexamine their position on homosexuality, we can only rephrase a statement commonly heard in Cuba today: "If we criticize, it is because we so prize the object that we want it to be better. If we criticize the revolution, it is because we value it so, we want it to be stronger."

Postscript: This Critical Dialogue piece is the result of an on-going political struggle about how best to deal with the issue of homosexuality in Cuba in the special section, given our solidarity with our lesbian and gay comrades and readers, on the one hand, and our admiration for and support of the Cuban revolution, on the other. We completed this particular essay too late to circulate it to all the members of the JUMP CUT staff. Thus the omission of any name does not necessarily indicate disagreement.

